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AN EXPLANATORY LABEL FOR
HELMETS

A MUSEUM, like a person, is apt to have special ideas in matters of labeling. In many instances labels give little more than a name, some museums believing that the objects should speak for themselves. Other museums, sympathizing with Professor G. Brown Goode, prepare labels which give information to the hungry—in large portions. Either extreme has evidently its good and bad features. Short labels irritate an intelligent reader by telling him that a spade *is* a spade, and a really long label, unless written in a masterly way, is avoided by nearly every one; for, sooth to say, an outsider does not often come to a museum with a fixed intention of learning at any cost. He likes, rather, to “nibble” and he is apt soon to get tired. If, therefore, a curator wishes to find how his labels are read and how they could be bettered, he should hover about his own cases and listen to what his callers say to one another—reversing his manners (and bruising his emotions sometimes) for the good of his department!

There is no question that long labels will sometimes be read; but one hardly knows beforehand just which objects are the most attractive. The ones which you and I would select are often by no means those which appeal to the general public. To such a degree is this true that even the mildest curator may decide to write his labels as he is convinced they ought to be written, “in the sight of God,” and let the public enjoy them or not. I have often noticed that people will be drawn to a long label if there is a picture in it, and a diagram, large and complicated, is sometimes appreciated by visitors whose externals do not suggest studious habits.

In a general way, I have come to the conclusion that a visitor likes to see the reasons for things—more often indeed than many imagine. And he is confused by dissociated objects: he feels satisfied if what he sees in the cases can be brought together in his mind as belonging to a *plan*. He knows that kinds and styles grade into one

another and he has a notion that the first form begat the second, perhaps in a vaguely evolutionary way. Now I believe that this is a widespread trait or state of mind which can be taken into account in our label-writing. In this direction it seems at the outset, I admit, unpromising to prepare labels which deal with general questions, say in the matter of evolution;¹ but if this can be done successfully, the return is worth the time and trouble it costs. For instance, I am inclined to believe that an interesting and very instructive diagram might appear in an exhibition of ancient furniture to show the changes which have taken place during the centuries in so familiar an object as a chair; or that in a gallery of ancient sculpture diagrams might attractively show the way in which the figure changed its mode of drapery during different centuries; or that picture-labels can point out that such objects as watches or clocks developed during the past three or four centuries in an orderly sequence; or that in the hall of arms and armor diagrams can indicate that swords, daggers, or pole-arms changed their shapes and structures in the course of time in regular progression. In the field of armor let us take a concrete example—the way in which the various forms of helmets arose from simpler beginnings.

In such a label, on page 175, we may trace the transformations which took place in helmets of usual form from early times down to 1700. In the diagram, one calls attention first of all to the nature of the object and its characteristic parts: it thus includes a picture of a well-developed helmet showing such structures as a bowl, crest, visor, ventail, chin guard, and neck-

¹ Evidently not strictly to be compared with the evolution of living beings, since these pass their changes along from parent to offspring, while “evolution” in objects represents only sequences in style. The latter kind of transformation, however, affords close analogies with the former and in some cases stops little short of true evolution—as when objects represent the work of the brains and hands of generations of the same family of artists—for here the product of organisms can be measured in terms of parent and offspring, somewhat in the fashion that the secretions of gland might be measured, a process which, all will admit, concerns true evolution.

plates. The remainder of the label would illustrate the way in which these structures came into being. We may look over the pictures of the various helmets and see at a glance that one oldest part was the bowl, or timbre, that the visor was next in point of age, and that the ventail, chin guard, and neck-piece were of later origin. The label should, obviously, speak for itself: none the less, it shows so broadly the history of the helmet that one is tempted to explain it in detail.

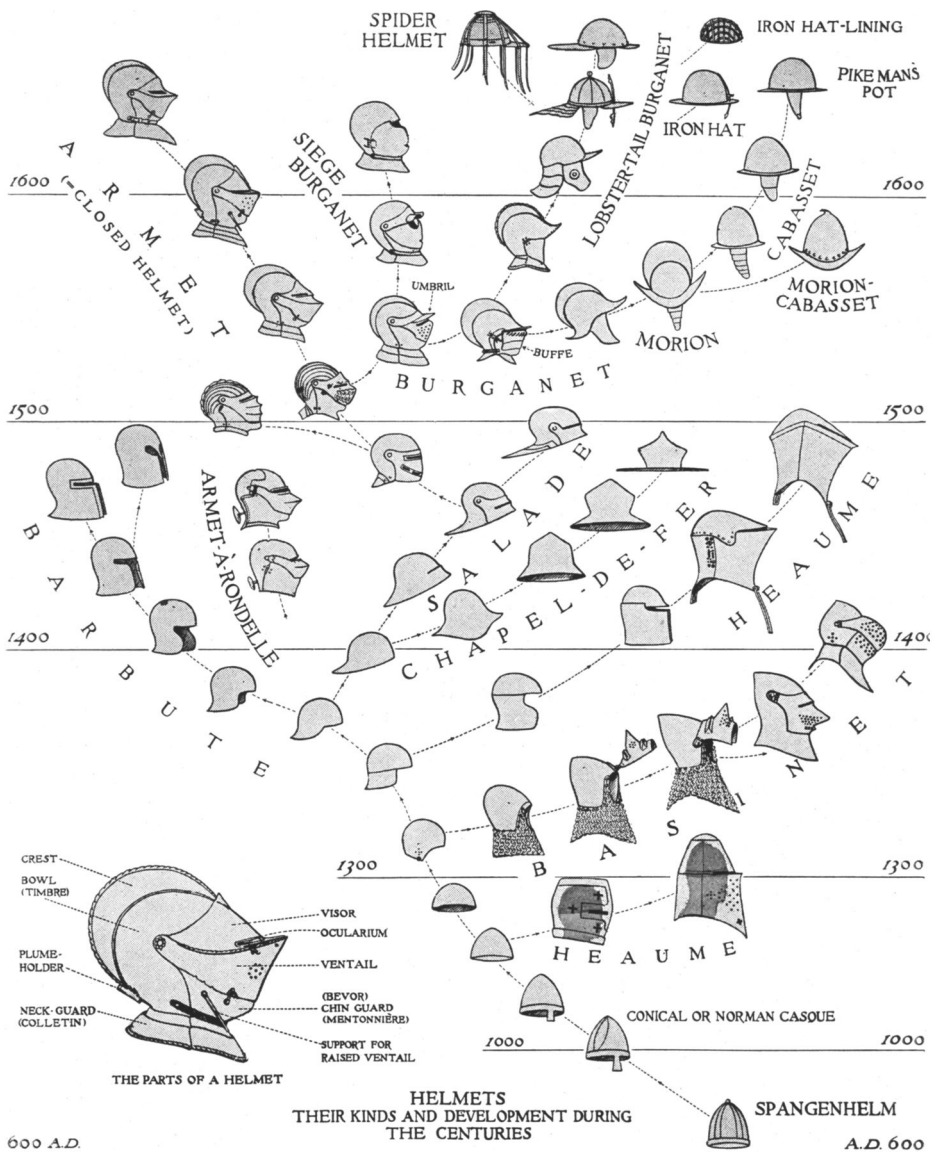
We notice, in the first place, that the label suggests the pictures in a zoological or geological handbook, where one traces the genealogy of horses, shells, or fishes. The "geological horizons" are in this case marked off horizontally as centuries—thus the lowest horizon in the present figure is about the time of the dispersal of the European nations, say A. D. 600.¹ Another level would be represented by the year 1000, others would be 1300, 1400, 1500, and 1600. And upon this chronological scaffolding helmets are shown "evolving." Thus, according to our diagram the usual type of an early European helmet was a "Spangenhelm", dome-shaped, made up of small pieces of iron. From this primitive form arose the Norman helmet of about 1000. This was merely a Spangenhelm made up of fewer, larger pieces, and with an innovation in the form of a projecting flange or nasal guard. The next stage in development produced a domed casque in a single piece with a reduced nasal guard.

Another stage evolved a tight-fitting skull-cap or primitive *basinet*. It was this head-piece which was sometimes inclosed in a second helmet which fitted loosely over the head like a great inverted pot, the so-called *heaume*, which was usually carried at the saddle-bow and laced in place over the helmeted head only when the knight went into the *mêlée*. This supplementary type, often pictured in documents dating just before and just after the year 1300, appears to have been difficult to fix in its right position; if it received a heavy blow, it ran the risk of becoming displaced and was thereupon worse than useless, for it

blindfolded the wearer, since its eye-slit was no longer opposite the eye. The weak feature of this head-piece was evidently the complicated way in which it was laced in place. Such a helmet we should call in biological jargon "highly specialized" (like a beast whose teeth are suited only for a special kind of food), and like a highly specialized animal could not long survive (for when the special kind of food gave out, the animal which could live only on that food perished). Hence we are not surprised to find that the period of usefulness of this *heaume* was brief, and that a new form of defence took its place.

This new fashion developed in the fourteenth century from a close-fitting skull-cap or *basinet*, and a series of forms of *basinets* dating between 1300 and 1400 indicates a tendency for the head-piece to become taller and revert somewhat to the fashion of the ancient Spangenhelm. It was, however, an improvement upon the older type, inasmuch as it had adjustments for a hood or cape of chain mail which protected the chin, neck, and upper shoulders. It had also a face-guard, formed as a mask of iron which in early *basinets* swung down in place from the forehead but in later ones was hinged at the side. In Northern Italy the best type of *basinet* next replaced or copied the *camail* in the downgrowth of the sides of the *basinet*. This result, however, was accomplished only as a *tour de force* on the part of the late fourteenth-century armorer—in fact, today, after the accumulated experience of over four hundred years in metal-working, it would be difficult to find an artist who could copy such a head-piece in a single piece of steel. This *basinet*, known as the Aquilegian, was easily the culminating point in this series of early casques. On another line, however, arose a curious blunt-nosed *basinet*, heavily formed, having wide neck plates and a separately modeled chin. This arose about 1400 and was in many respects so perfect a closed helmet that we wonder why it was not made the point of divergence for types which appeared only at a much later period. In a word, it must have had in its structure some fundamental defect which prevented the armorer of the day from con-

¹ The history of the helmet in times earlier than this will be summarized in a separate label.



tinuing its use. Certainly it was heavy and unwieldy. It was set down over the head like a heaume and was a cage for the wearer's head rather than a helmet: it could not be satisfactorily fastened in position, its chin was immobile, and altogether it was too highly specialized long to survive.

It was again a simpler form, as explained in the diagram, which became the point of divergence for various forms of helmets. Thus the basinet which developed a neck guard formed of a separate piece seems to be the "ancestor" of a new line of heaumes, or heavy tilting head-pieces, which do not appear to be related to the ones which, as we noted, occurred about the year 1300. The later heaumes are shown in the diagram in four examples in which, decade after decade, the head-piece increased in size and was more and more perfectly adapted to its use. Thus this heaume came to be locked down to the breastplate and back-plate and could be used only when the wearer held his head in a certain position, as in bending forward in the saddle when tilting. Such a head-piece led to no further evolution.

It was a simpler form which once again must be sought as the "progenitor" of various types. Thus it was a small head-piece having a short neck guard not in a separate piece but arising from the timbre, which seems to have been the basal form of all the later kinds of head-pieces. In one line it gave rise to the *chapeles de fer*, in another line to the *barbutes*, in still another to the *salades*, and, finally, most important, to the closed helmet which first appeared toward the middle of the fifteenth century.

The origin of the chapel-de-fer is clearly shown in the diagram. The latest of its type was a broad-brimmed hat of steel which arose from a simpler form with a sloping brim, which in turn arose from a wide, longish head-piece, i. e., one still having radial symmetry. The earliest chapel was depressed laterally and inclosed the sides of the head.

An equally interesting evolutionary series were the *salades* which developed extreme bilateral symmetry. At first they were produced backward so as to cover the nape of the neck. Later they developed in the

brow region a slot through which the wearer could see. In the next stage there appeared a separate plate which rotated in such a way as to form a visor. The latest forms of this head-piece had extremely long neck guards which were flexible and formed of separate pieces, so that the wearer could bend his head far backward.

Equally clear is the origin of *barbutes*. These were hood-like head-pieces developed from a single piece of metal, which came to inclose the face more and more perfectly, and even developed a nose guard. This last type of head-piece is interesting, since it resembles the most perfect helmet known in classical antiquity, the "Corinthian casque" of the Greeks. While it is possible that the most complete *barbute* *may* have arisen during the Renaissance as a result of the widespread study of classical antiquities, it is more probable, I think, that it had an entirely independent origin—a case of "parallelism," as the zoölogist says, when he contrasts the wing of the bat and the wing of the bird, i. e., things similar in form and use but different in mode of origin.

It will be seen that all of these head-pieces—*chapeles*, *salades*, and *barbutes*—were faulty in so far as they have no well-attached chin defenses. As hat-shaped head-pieces they could not be held securely on the head. These objections were first overcome in the *armet*, as shown in the diagram. There was first developed (about 1450) the *armet à rondelle*—in many ways the most beautiful helmet which the art of the armorer ever devised. It is unlike later armets and it is even doubtful whether it belongs at all in the main line of their "descent." The *armet à rondelle* was really a *barbute* in which the cheek-pieces grew so wide that for convenience they became hinged to the top of the helmet, and closed below over a peg on the point of the chin. The visor, too, was archaic: it was the visor of a basinet but much reduced in size, still retaining, however, the basinet's curious hinge-like arrangement at the side. The neck region of this *armet* was protected by a *camail*, somewhat as in the earlier basinet, and it had at its back a disk, or *rondelle*, attached like a mushroom to a short, stout

stalk, which appears to have been used first as a protector for the fastening of the neck-gear of chain-mail and later was retained as an ornament. It is doubtful, I say, whether this kind of armet gave rise to the later armets as shown in the present diagram. It had already become too highly "specialized" in its attachment to the cape of chain-mail, as well as in its rondelle and its enormous cheek-flaps.

The origin of the later armets can, therefore, I believe, be better understood in the diagram by taking as a starting-point the curious head-piece shown as arising from the visored salades. This primitive armet was a salade which was deep in shape and closely modeled to the head. Its visor extended below the chin and was provided with breathing apertures which suggest crudely the lips of the wearer. The neck region had already been made flexible by the appearance of laminae such as one finds in late forms of salades. If we start with this form, the development of the various types of head-pieces of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can now easily be traced. From it arose a long series of closed helmets, *burganets*, *morions*, *cabasets*, iron hats, and, as the latest and most degenerate form of the helmet, a small metal hat-lining.

Studying some of these helmets in detail, we find that about the year 1500 splendid armets, or helmets, were developed: they were more perfect "functionally" than even the armet-à-rondelle: thus, their crown or timbre was complete, modeled closely to the entire cranium; they required no straps or laces to keep them in place; they needed no neck defense of chain mail; and they were provided with both chin-piece and visor which not only "fitted," but were more conveniently articulated, for both rotated from the same pivot. Clearly, therefore, this casque was easier to fix in place or to take off. At this time, too, fluted surfaces appeared in the metal to make the bowl of the head-piece relatively lighter and stronger. Some of these

helmets even had close-fitting necks which were so accurately moulded around the border of the neck-armor that they allowed the head-piece to rotate in a "track." The next stage in the development of the armet produced separate visors, that is to say, the upper half of the earlier visor became a separate piece but rotated always on the same pivot. Then arose various forms of crests and neck-gear, as shown in the figure.

On the one hand, *burganets* arose from armets developing a visor-like brim, like the peak of a cap. In late *burganets* (siege-pieces) this peak, or *umbril*, disappears: in earlier *burganets* which were designed for light use the chin region or *bevor* disappears, or is replaced by a demountable chin-guard (*buffe*). In these light *burganets* formal ear-tabs come to replace the heavier defenses of the side of the head. Also neck-guards, which were short in earlier types, became lengthened out, laminated, and flaring as in the Cromwellian "lobster tail" *burganets*. And in the last member of the series the neck-guard either became rudimentary, as in the curious spider helmet, or else was flattened out in a single heavy plate. *Morions* were clearly the derivatives of *burganets*, and *cabasets* were shortened-up *morions* in which the crescentic brow-and-neck guard was reduced to a short, flat brim. In this head-piece the crest or comb disappeared, after passing through a series of decadent forms. The latest effective helmets were pikemen's pots and iron hats; from them descended, in a degenerate line, iron hat-linings. In these the earliest were solid, shaped to the crown of a felt hat. They were next made lighter, sometimes by having holes cut in them, and later they became lighter still by being built up, basket fashion, of interlaced iron strips. In the last form of all they were formed as a series of bands so articulated that, when not in use, they could be folded up into a single piece or block and thrust into the owner's pocket.

B. D.